

A HUMAN RIGHTS ECONOMY: What is it and why do we need it

Working paper for inputs – March 2025

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"We need to dismantle the architecture of inequalities, and rebuild our economies with an architecture that enhances human rights" - [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023](#)

Since [2020](#), the richest five men in the world have doubled their fortunes while almost five billion people have become poorer. Such disparities need to change. All of our economies could and should enable the fulfilment of all people's rights, such as to food, health, and education. States' human rights obligations should also guide global economic governance, putting, for example, participation, justice, equality, and non-discrimination at the heart of the global financial architecture. Increasingly, human rights actors are calling for a shift towards a ["rights-based economy"](#) or a ["human rights economy."](#)

What is a human rights economy?

A human rights economy is an economy that puts people and the planet at the centre of economic decisions. It can be used as a means to dismantle structural barriers and impediments to realize all human rights equally. This means considering all civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights holistically, including the right to development and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

International human rights law obligates governments to raise and deploy the maximum of their available resources to realize rights. This includes existing resources and those that governments should raise through taxation or receive through development cooperation. It also requires governments to cooperate to create the enabling environment to meet their human rights obligations. This means that a human rights economy engages policy questions related to issues such as tax, debt, trade, and a just ecological transition with a focus on the realization of all people's rights.

Human rights provide a framework to raise and allocate resources fairly, remedy inequalities, support planet-centred participatory development, and rebalance power in our economies. Human rights thus provide guideposts against which economic policies can be measured, assessed and benchmarked. A human rights economy is a broad concept that can encompass other rights-aligned transformative approaches to the economy that have emerged from many movements, including climate justice, gender justice, and decolonization.

Where does the concept of a human rights economy come from?

The concept of a human rights economy draws from various traditions, such as [feminist economics](#) and [other perspectives offering alternatives to the mainstream economic models](#). For instance, in 2011 [Balakrishnan and Elson](#) provided a groundbreaking analysis of macroeconomic policy instruments, namely fiscal and monetary policy, public expenditure, taxation, and trade policy, that could determine whether they can align with human rights norms and obligations.

The idea of the human rights economy is still evolving, with contributions from a range of academics, civil society organizations, and international organizations over the past few decades. This has included a range of organizations around the world, such as the Center for Economic and Social Rights, Christian Aid, the Human Rights Centre of the University of Pretoria, the Institute of Economics of the University of Campinas, the Financial Transparency Coalition, and the Third World Network.

Is there just one human rights economy?

The concept of a human rights economy does not prescribe a particular economic model. There are various possible human rights economies.

Academics, civil society organizations, social movements, and policy-makers have developed in recent decades a range of influential concepts to guide economic reforms in order to better fulfil human rights, such as the care economy, just transition, wellbeing economy, [social and solidarity economies](#), as well as perspectives emanating from Indigenous knowledge. A human rights economy embraces and builds on these, and seeks to build connections between these ideas and to provide a normative framework to strengthen economic policy-making.

What does a human rights economy mean in practice?

A human rights economy framing can support policy makers in two ways: it can help to inspire and design new policies to deliver on human rights and a healthy planet; and it can be used to measure the impact of previous and existing laws and policies against human rights.

For instance, this [means](#) using human rights obligations to guide budget decisions and to invest adequately in public education, health, social security and other rights; to take meaningful action to reduce inequalities; to refrain from avoidable austerity measures or cuts to social programs that result in retrogressions to the fulfilment of rights. Fulfilling rights requires financial resources, which means, for instance, putting in place progressive taxation, reviewing subsidies, and addressing the debt crisis.

Such approaches are not new; many governments have already started taking steps to build human rights economies. States agreed in the Pact for the Future to develop indicators to measure progress beyond GDP; UN member states have approved the terms of reference to create a framework convention on international tax cooperation; and states at the Climate Conference of Parties (COP) have been working since 2023 on developing a work program on a just ecological transition. If adequately designed to be anchored in the whole human rights framework, these steps could lead to significant progress in building human rights economies.

Because it is rooted in international human rights law, a human rights economy demands that governments pay attention to historically under-considered economic, social, and cultural rights, such as the rights to decent work, health, education, social security, and housing, as well as to the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment and the right to development. It also demands that governments consider these rights in the context of the climate and ecological crisis, given that [their fulfilment is contingent upon and conducive to a healthy flourishing planet](#).

It also obligates governments to create an enabling environment for the realization of rights, including through international cooperation and meaningful participation. International financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and other global, regional and national development finance institutions play an important role in this respect. Their current practices often undermine the possibility of building human rights economies. Reforming, for instance, the IMF's role in cutting social spending that affects rights, or the World Bank's narrow conception of targeted social security, as well as reviewing decision-making in these institutions, are critical elements to building human rights economies.

Where are policies that align with human rights economies being pursued?

In recent years, some governments have launched initiatives that align with and promote objectives of the human rights economy. While some may be more targeted and others broader in scope, they come from both Global South and Global North countries and represent important steps towards achieving a human rights economy for all.

The Gambia has made significant efforts to identify and create fiscal space for social protection through its [National Social Protection Policy 2015-2025](#). The Gambia has [called for](#) countries to align economic policies with human rights and has highlighted the importance of addressing the debt crisis and avoiding austerity measures that undermine human rights.

Colombia has shown a commitment to feminist fiscal justice and social protection. In 2019, Colombia's Constitutional Court [decided](#) that taxing menstrual pads and tampons constituted a form of indirect discrimination against women and was therefore unconstitutional. In 2024, the government approved a pension [reform](#) to end extreme poverty and extend social protection coverage for older people. For each child, up to three, women receive a deduction of 50 weeks of pension contributions. The government expects to finance these reforms through additional revenues created by recent and ongoing fiscal reforms, which include increasing marginal income tax rates on the wealthy, taxing capital gains at a higher level, higher corporate taxes on extractives and fossil fuels, and a higher minimum corporate tax rate.

Spain has also championed at home and abroad the strengthening of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) - an ethical and values-based approach to economic activity that prioritizes the welfare of people and planet. Alongside Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Equatorial Guinea, France, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Morocco, Senegal, and Slovenia, Spain [co-sponsored the General Assembly resolution on SSE that the UN adopted in 2023](#).

What next?

Although moving to human rights economies will be achieved progressively, small and large steps can be taken immediately, such as:

- Incorporate human rights economy concepts into international processes and documents and use them to guide international financial architecture reform, including at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, and the Second World Summit for Social Development, along with Human Rights Council resolutions, COP meetings, and other global and regional agreements.
- Conduct human rights budget planning and analysis, including working with international organizations such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to pilot initiatives aligned with a human rights economy approach.
- Engage through the board of international financial institutions, especially the IMF and the World Bank, to consistently review and realign their policies and practices with human rights law.

Want to learn more?

- [A Rights-Based Economy: Putting people and planet first](#)
- [Fact Sheet No. 37: Frequently Asked Questions on the Right to Development](#)
- [Principles for Human Rights in Fiscal Policy, May 2021](#)
- [Righting the Economy: Towards a People's Recovery from Economic and Environmental Crisis](#)
- [Seeding change for an economy that enhances human rights – The Surge Initiative](#)
- [The Human Rights Economy – From Concept to Practical Application](#)

